

Section C

Standards and the IEP

This section offers guidance to educators in understanding the connection from the Core Content Standards and Benchmarks, to the district standards and benchmarks (including grade level standards and benchmarks) to IEPs.



Standards Based Assessment

IDEA Requirements

IDEA speaks specifically to the need to hold students with disabilities to the same goals and standards as students without disabilities. NCLB reinforces that same requirement with the addition that students in alternate assessments may work toward “alternate achievement” standards. Both IDEA and NCLB require that all students must be included in some form of assessment to evaluate their progress on the standards that drive the general curriculum. Because of the requirement for assessment of progress in the general curriculum, it is important for the student to have access to the curriculum on which he or she will be assessed.

In the past, there was no way to look at the progress of students with disabilities as a group because their progress was determined individually, through the IEP process. IDEA and NCLB require that scores of students be aggregated, no matter which form of the assessment they take, so for the first time their progress can be included in the total group. Also, the scores of students with disabilities must be disaggregated from the scores of student without disabilities, so their progress as a specific group can be evaluated.

The IEP team will play key roles in standards based assessment for the student with a disability in a variety of ways:

- Determining how, not if, the student will be assessed, and will document that decision on the IEP. There are basically three choices for how students with disabilities will participate in large-scale assessments:
 - In the general assessment without accommodations,
 - in the general assessment with accommodations, or
 - in the alternate assessment.(For more information regarding this decision, refer to Section A: Participation Guidelines)
- Determining the standards/benchmarks on which the student will be assessed.
- Creating standards based IEP objectives that enable the student to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum (for additional information, refer to the 5 *Phases of the IEP Process*)

Although the purpose of this guide is not to assist teams in writing IEP objectives, there may be a need to help teams make closer alignments between IEP procedures and guidelines already in place and requirements of alternate assessment. A short discussion will follow.

Research (McLaughlin et al, 1999) has documented the improved instruction resulting from the alignment of IEPs with state standards. This improved instruction was evident in increased exposure to academic content, more challenging goals and higher

expectations, more focused instruction, and increased collaboration between general and special education teachers.

In looking at these outcomes, some hallmarks of quality IEP discussions around developing standards based IEP objectives become clear:

- The IEP team needs to have copies of the (district) grade level standards and benchmarks for the grade level in which the student is enrolled.
- The IEP team should use these grade level standards as the starting point for discussion for both goal setting and instruction rather than writing a goal and then trying to match it to a grade level standard.
- The IEP team needs to include a member(s) who has expertise in what the standards mean. Generally, this will be the general education teacher who is “highly qualified” in the content area being discussed (reading, math, and/or science). Even though a general education teacher has been required to be a member of the IEP team, this has been an underutilized resource in most cases. By relying on this expert for collaboration in IEP development (as well as ongoing instructional delivery – either direct or collaboratively), students should receive improved educational focus in the content area. This expertise will be invaluable as standards are reviewed, as individual learning needs are discussed, and as annual goals and related services are specified. This content area expertise will guide teams in developing instructional programs and services which are not only appropriate to the individual needs of the student but maintain the intent of the standard, as well (hence, are “aligned”).
- Sometimes the selection of a standard/benchmark may be easily translated into a target skill (specific measurable behavior). For example, the reading CCSB “A. Students can comprehend what they read in a variety of literary and informational texts” and the 10-12 grade benchmark of “1. Students can understand stated information they have read” might easily be converted to the target skill (specific measurable behavior) of “answer multiple choice comprehension questions about grade level novels 80% of the time over 3 consecutive selections.” For other students whose performances must be measured more discretely, it might be necessary to break the skill down even further and in greater detail such as “increase content related sight word vocabulary by matching single word printed text to a picture demonstrating the meaning of the word.” Further specificity such as “using an optical scanning device” could help teams make certain that appropriate supports are identified and targeted for instruction. As student needs require more and more of this type of specificity, it is important for the content area expert team member to make sure that the increasingly detailed and individualized target skill continues to work toward the same construct as specified in the standard/benchmark for all students.
- As is the case for any IEP objective, a standards based IEP objective should address a skill that is not already in the student's repertoire or one that is there but only at a low level of accurate and/or independent performance. Objectives on which the student is close to or at mastery are not appropriate. It is also important to select an objective on which the student might be expected to achieve or make significant progress toward achieving within one school year.

Once the target skill has been written, it will be important for teams to keep in mind the “functional performance” of the skill. This does not mean functional in the traditional sense of the word but means “a description of how the student uses the (academic) skills that he/she has acquired” as stated in the *5 Phases of the IEP Process* document and training.

Selecting Standards/Benchmarks

Local School/District Standards

Local school/district standards likely include a wide variety of grade level benchmarks and specific standard description labels. The benchmarks articulate some of the performance expectations for the general population of students. When determining which skills the student will address in the alternate assessment, it is important to review the student's school/district standards and determine which standards will be targeted for the assessment. Educators should consider the most challenging yet achievable level of performance within the general curriculum for each student.

Core Content Standards and Benchmarks Corresponding to the Iowa Tests –

Iowa's schools and districts, rather than the state agency, have developed local standards and assessments to measure the progress of students in the general curriculum. The federal large-scale assessment requirements apply to local educational agencies in Iowa. An alternate assessment must be based on the same curriculum frameworks as the general assessment, and must provide results that can be aggregated, disaggregated and reported by the state to the federal government. Therefore, the Iowa Alternate Assessment is based upon elements of local district curriculum frameworks and performance expectations that are consistent across all districts.

In late spring of 2003, The Iowa Department of Education compiled a set of Core Content Standards and Benchmarks Corresponding to the Iowa Tests which reflect standards in reading, math, and science (added in 2005) which are common across most or all districts in Iowa. These were then further broken down into grade level benchmarks grouped by grade spans corresponding to late elementary grades, middle school grades, and high school grades. While these Core Content Standards and Benchmarks Corresponding to the Iowa Tests are not and should not be interpreted as “state standards”, they should help districts see the commonality of what are considered to be important indicators of learning for all Iowa students.

The Core Content Standards and Benchmarks Corresponding to the Iowa Tests document contains:

- One Reading Content Standard
 - Students can comprehend what they read in a variety of literary and information texts.

- Four Math Content Standards
 - Students can understand and apply a variety of math concepts.
 - Students can understand and apply methods of estimation.
 - Students can solve a variety of math problems.
 - Students can interpret data presented in a variety of ways.
- Four Science Content Standards
 - Students can understand and apply skills used in scientific inquiry.
 - Students can understand concepts and relationships in life science.
 - Students can understand concepts and relationships in Earth/space sciences.
 - Students can understand concepts and relationships in physical science.

The Core Content Standards and Benchmarks Corresponding to the Iowa Tests document contains grade level benchmarks for each standard. The benchmarks articulate some of the performance expectations for the general population of students that are seen in most if not all districts. Educators should consider the most challenging yet achievable level of performance within the general curriculum for each student when determining the target skill for assessment.

Alignment of Skills, Standards, Instruction, and Assessment

For the purposes of alternate assessment, the IEP team should select at least one standard/benchmark from the district standards/benchmarks. (For additional information on the IEP team process in selecting standards and/or target skills for assessment, please refer to *5 Phases of the IEP Process*.) This will be the primary benchmark for assessment. The IEP team may choose to select additional districts benchmarks if desired. When choosing benchmarks for students in the alternate assessment, it may be helpful to think in terms of the critical function. The critical function refers to function or purpose the behavior/skill is to serve or the outcome of the behavior/skill (White & Haring, 1980). For example, the critical function of a district standard stating, "Student analyzes characteristics of two dimensional and three dimensional geometric shapes" would be learning and applying information on geometric shapes.

Once a standard/benchmark has been selected, then evidence is collected to demonstrate the student's performance on that standard/ benchmark, making sure to cover all dimensions of the rubric. As is done for all students, instructional activities should be developed to teach district standards/benchmarks. Using the standards/benchmarks that were selected for assessment to plan instructional activities while providing necessary supports (adaptations, modifications, assistive technology) will help teach content area skills to the student. When the student is working within the general education class or the teacher is working in collaboration with the general education teacher, it may only be necessary to provide the supports given that the instructional activity has already been planned.

Selecting Challenging, Achievable Standards/Benchmarks

For students with disabilities assessed by alternate assessments, the standards determined for a particular grade level, in most cases, may be well outside the student's present level of performance. However, it is important to consider how a student with disabilities might participate in the standards based curriculum. The following process describes how to make the achievement of the standards and benchmarks feasible and maintain the use of materials, activities and products that are chronologically age appropriate so that access to general curriculum is still being provided.

1. Select a Standard and/or Benchmark that:
 - a. is not already in the student's performance repertoire,
 - b. is addressed in the grade level curriculum,
 - c. is achievable for the student within a school year.(This can be accomplished by reviewing present level of performance from the student's IEP, educational discussions, parental input, general education teacher observations, pretests, etc.)
2. Determine what assistive technology, adaptations, or modifications the student needs to access the content. For example, one student may need step by step picture directions, another may be required only to complete the last step of a chain, while yet another may need to use a single access switch.
 - a. How does the student best understand information (written text, pictures, objects, oral directions, etc?)
 - b. How does the student best demonstrate understanding of information (e.g., writing, using pictures to express thoughts, eye gaze, adapted equipment, etc.)
3. Reduce the complexity of the benchmarks. For example, a less complex indicator for the benchmark of "Students can understand and apply concepts of geometry" may be "matches geometric shapes". While simpler, this still maintains the intent of the standard. Browder (in press) describes 4 guiding questions to help determine if a skill (or in this case, less complex indicator of the benchmark) is "really reading" or "really math:"
 - Is there a direct link/connection to a state (district) standard?
 - Do the data reflect performance in either reading or math?
 - Would a general education teacher agree that it is reading or math?
 - Is there a connection to general education classroom usefulness?
4. Embed other IEP objectives within the grade level curriculum instruction and activities.

Information included in the Access General Curriculum Module (Clayton and Burdge, 2003) may be helpful to reference.

Function of the Alternate Assessment

This process encourages teaching students to district content standards, the underlying intent of IDEA, Iowa Chapter 12, and No Child Left Behind. Additionally, it captures information being gathered during instruction rather than halting instruction for hours of assessment for each student. The option of choosing a skill based on standards/benchmarks that also aligns with the student's IEP skill will further merge instruction and assessment. In Iowa, this process is further facilitated by the requirement that all students have standards based IEPs.

The function of alternate assessment is to provide reliable information on student performance indicators and to provide local and state education agencies with meaningful information on the efficacy of educational practice; specifically, student involvement and progress in achieving standards and benchmarks which are instructed through the general curriculum. It is this aspect - involvement and progress in the general curriculum - that distinguishes IDEA and NCLB. Although the access to the general education mandate does not specifically speak to the issue of "where" the student is educated, it is clear that to ensure that students gain access to the general curriculum in meaningful ways, efforts must be made to actively involve them in typical educational settings to the maximum extent appropriate. Indeed, a statement in the IEP must be provided on the extent to which program modifications and supports are provided so that the student can be educated and interact with children without disabilities. Consequently, IEP teams need to consider the placement implications of the access mandate; that is, to ensure that students have access to a challenging curriculum and be held to high expectations, efforts must be made to maximize their participation in the general education classroom. By doing so, the goals of IDEA and NCLB are truly realized. The Integration Module (Burdge and Clayton, 2004) will give IEP teams guidance and current research on integrated/inclusive education.

Selected Readings and References

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